

# **Rendezvous with Destiny**

By Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

The walls were a weary shade of gray and bare of ornamentation. Stale air whistled through ancient ventilation systems. This place had not seen the light of day in more than a millennia.

Alex Winger propped her elbows on the table, resting her head in her hands. How long had she been here? Four hours? Eight?

Her blue eyes shifted to the vid monitors suspended from the ceiling. She wondered who had been watching the earlier interrogation and her reaction to this isolation. Would they believe her story?

The door slid open. Two men, dressed in uniforms of the New Republic military, entered the room and sat down across from her. The lieutenant fidgeted slightly in his chair, obviously inexperienced in these matters. The major was expressionless, his eyes transfixed on Alex. She could sense that he remained skeptical of her story.

"All right, Miss Winger," the major said, slowly enunciating each word. "Tell me about this secret Imperial research facility one more time."

Alex met his gaze, trying to bury her growing impatience. She calmly explained -- it had to be at least the fourth time -- that her comrade, a research scientist named Carl Barzon, had been taken to the secret base. And that ore, mined on her homeworld of Garos IV, was being shipped there. The location of the base remained shrouded behind a veil of Imperial secrecy that her friends in the Garosian resistance had been unable to penetrate.

The major's voice was as cold as his icy stare. "And you expect us to believe that the daughter of an Imperial governor works for the resistance on Garos IV?"

"It's true," she said, slapping her hand down on the table in frustration. Suddenly she heard a familiar voice call out to her. "Alex?"



Looking around the room, Alex rubbed her eyes. Computers, communications equipment, and displays of all sorts blinked a rainbow of colors in the dimly lit room. The tap-tap of fingers across a keyboard were the only sounds she heard. She was in the underground operations center -- on Garos IV -- worlds away from that interrogation room she envisioned on Coruscant.

Her friend, a comm operator by the name of Wink Tasion, frowned as he transcribed an incoming message. The concern on his face couldn't have been more obvious. But he wasn't looking at his display. He was staring at Alex.

"Are you okay?" he asked her even before he finished typing the transmission he'd received. "You looked like you were somewhere else."

Alex sighed, smiling gently at him. "You could say that," she said, removing her headset. "You won't believe this, but I dreamt I was being interrogated by someone from New Republic Intelligence!" She shook her head and a broad grin swept across her face. "They were having a hard time with the concept of an Imperial governor's daughter working for the good guys."

Chuckling, Wink remembered his own introduction to freedom fighter Alex Winger in the ops center. He'd held a blaster on her until his comrades convinced him that Governor Tork Winger's daughter was indeed a member of the resistance movement on Garos. They'd had a lot of laughs over it since then. "Well," he teased her, "you have to admit it does sound a little far-fetched."

Alex's smile faded and she stared blankly at the display on her screen. "How will I ever convince them I'm telling the truth?" she said, ignoring his taunt.

"You're not in this alone, Alex," he reminded her.

But Alex didn't seem to hear him. "There's just not that much time," she said quietly. Thoughts of a snow-covered mountainside crashed in upon her senses -- two figures, one hand reaching out to another, wind whipping around their bodies, hands ripped apart, falling -- No!

"Huh? What do you mean?" Wink asked. He saw that far-off look in her eyes.

She sighed, shaking her head. "It's just a feeling that I've had."

Wink turned back to his monitor, his forehead creased with furrows. "Maybe that daydream of yours is a sign, Alex. Look at this message I just got."

Alex leaned toward him to read the display. Her senses tingled with anticipation. One of their operatives at Chado's Pub was reporting an interesting conversation with a freighter captain whose ship was taking on supplies at the spaceport. "Hmm. Captain of the *Star Quest* -- is that the Suwantek light freighter that's in docking bay three?" she asked Wink.

"That's the one," he told her.

Free-traders had been a more frequent sight at Ariana's spaceport in the weeks since Grand Admiral Thrawn's defeat. With the Imperial fleet in disarray, these independents had been hired to transport supplies to the Empire's secret research facility. Alex and her friends in the underground were hopeful that word of this operation would finally reach the New Republic -- perhaps through a contact like this freighter captain.

"I'm going to check this out," Alex said.

"I'll inform Paca."

Alex shook her head, cocking it toward the chronometer that read 0200. "No, don't bother him," she replied. "It's probably another false lead."

"Okay," he said as she got up to leave. "Hey, Alex?"

"Yeah?" She saw him studying her face.

"Good luck," he said. "May the Force be with you."

Alex wondered if Wink suspected that she planned to do more than just "check out" the crew of that freighter. She'd never told anyone about her visions of the snowy mountainside that harbored that secret Imperial base. Something, or someone, was drawing her to it. She had to go there. It was part of her destiny.

Nodding to her comrade, Alex headed into the underground tunnel system. She had a feeling about that freighter in docking bay three. A feeling that it wasn't just another ship hired by the Empire to move supplies.

\* \* \*

Pink eyes and perked antennae studied displays on a dozen different panels in the *Star Quest's* cockpit. Satisfied that they were at the correct location, Captain Tere Metallo pulled back on the hyperdrive levers and watched starlines form into distinct points of light. Three hours earlier their freighter had departed Garos IV loaded with supplies. With orders from the Imperials to proceed to these coordinates, their instructions were to wait for another contact.



Picking up her datapad, Metallo quietly scanned the virus program she'd be releasing into the Imperial computer network on Sarahwiee -- her little contribution as backup to Page's Commandos. She smiled to herself, thoughtfully tracing the jagged scar that tore across her pasty gray face..

Gil Crosear, Metallo's first mate, slipped unobtrusively into the cockpit. Metallo had decided long ago that his uncanny ability to move about unnoticed was a talent the wiry young man had acquired from nature. After four years of working with Gil, there were times even she could not spot him in a crowd.

Scanning the emptiness all around them, Gil tapped impatiently on one of the ship's long range sensors. "Well, where are they?" he finally asked. His dark eyes shifted rapidly between the boards and the space beyond the viewport.

Metallo settled back into her seat, calmly twirling slender fingers around the meter-length silver braid that protruded from her otherwise hairless head. Her "scantennae," as Gil called her stamen-like sensors, picked up his increased pulse rate. Patience was one virtue Gil still had not mastered. "Relax, Gilly," she gently chided him. "They'll be here."

Gil took a deep breath and pushed a loose shock of dark hair from his eyes. "How far ahead is the other team?" he asked.

"One point three hours."

"So," Gil pointed at the datapad in Metallo's hand, "you think this virus will wipe out whatever Page and his bombs don't take care of?"

Metallo nodded. "No doubt about it."

"This is one strange supply run, Cap'n," Gil said, skillfully punching keys on one board to modify his sensor scan. "Sittin' out here in the middle of nowhere."

Eyeing her partner, Metallo's antennae twitched slightly. Though he tried to hide it, Gil was a bit more on edge than on their previous missions.

"According to reports Command briefed us on, this is standard procedure," she reassured him.

"Command?" a voice questioned from the rear of the cockpit. Metallo and Gil turned at the same instant. Two blasters came to bear on the young stowaway. Then all of a sudden, an alarm began to blare on the *Star Quest*.

"Is that who you're waiting for?" Alex asked calmly, pointing toward the Imperial *Strike*-class cruiser that emerged from hyperspace about 1,000 kilometers off their port bow.

"Who the *krazsch* are you!" Metallo demanded, falling back into her native Riileb tongue.

"I'm Alex," she told them. "Don't you think you'd better answer their hailing signal?"

Gil stared wide-eyed, his blaster trained on Alex, as Metallo silenced the proximity alarm. Flicking a switch on her comm board, she called, "This is Tere Metallo, captain of the *Star Quest*."

"Transmit the recognition signal, *Star Quest*," an authoritative voice responded over the comm channel.

"Transmitting now," Metallo replied, glancing back toward Alex. Her antennae moved imperceptibly, sizing up the young woman who peered intently over Gil's shoulder. She picked up no sign of distress, only a calm resolve. And it struck her as odd, that instead of feeling worried that their cover had been blown, she found herself thinking about that name -- Alex. She'd only heard it used one other time for a human female. Her former first mate, a man named Matt Turhaya, had talked of a young daughter he'd lost in an Imperial raid. Her name had been Alex, too.

"Stand by to receive new coordinates, *Star Quest*."

The harsh voice interrupted Metallo's musings. "Ready when you are," she called.

"Transmission commencing."

Metallo checked the display as their new destination was fed into the ship's nav computer. "Transmission received. *Star Quest* out," she replied. Clicking off the comm, Metallo diverted all her attention to their unwelcome guest. She could tell there was more to this young woman than met the eye. "What are you doing on my ship?"

"I'm a member of the resistance on Garos IV," Alex told them.

Gil's eyebrows disappeared behind his dark locks. He threw a sidelong glance toward Metallo. Her eyes remained riveted on Alex. "We've been waiting for someone like you for so long," Alex continued.

"Waiting for us?" Metallo asked.

"For the New Republic--"

"Hold on now! Who said anything about the New Republic? We're gettin' paid to transport supplies for the Empire," Gil insisted, painfully aware from the expression on Alex's face that any attempt at subterfuge was in vain.

"You may be getting paid by them," Alex replied, "but I overheard enough of your conversation to know where your loyalties lie."

Metallo remained indifferent. "Keep talking," she told Alex.

"Let's see--" Alex said, "Command said this was standard procedure, the other team is just ahead, bombs, computer viruses -- sounds like you're planning to drop off more than just supplies."

"That still doesn't explain to us why you're here," Gil said.

"One of my colleagues was arrested on Garos. He's being forced to work at the research facility," Alex said, watching Metallo closely. "Please, Captain, I just want to get him out."

Metallo concentrated her scan on Alex -- heart rate normal, blood pressure normal -- the girl seemed to be telling the truth. Recalling the briefing the commando teams had concerning Garos IV, Metallo knew a previous scout had reported resistance activity on the planet. "Did your leaders authorize this little escapade?"

Alex avoided Metallo's eyes. "Not exactly."

Gil shook his head in disbelief, and Metallo noticed he was more relaxed than he'd been in hours. "You mean, you decided to do this on your own?" he asked.

Alex looked from Gil to Metallo. "I had this feeling. I can't really explain it." She gazed out the viewport. "It just seemed that time was running out," she said quietly.

Metallo stared at the young woman, struck by the urgent tone in Alex's voice and that look in her eyes. Something about it reminded her of Luke Skywalker's expression at their mission briefing. There had been something in his eyes, too -- that sense of urgency, the dread of uncovering another of the Emperor's secrets. Even after all he'd been through in recent weeks, all he'd said was, "We must go there."

"You took a big chance, kid," Metallo said. "What if we'd been loyal to the Empire?"

"Well," Alex hesitated, "then I guess I would have introduced myself as the daughter of the Imperial governor."

Metallo's pink eyes narrowed. "Cute, kid," she grimaced. "Real Cute."

"Not a bad idea," Gil chuckled softly. "Just a rebellious teen out for a joyride, eh?"

"Yeah," Alex said, breathing a sigh of relief, "something like that."

"So -- you have a plan for rescuing this friend of yours?" Metallo asked.

"Well, I've got a few ideas for getting around Imperial security," Alex told them.

Gil chuckled again, a broad grin crossing his face. "One thing's for sure, she's not short on guts!"

Alex smiled for the first time. Metallo frowned, but Gil was right. You had to admire the girl's spirit. She stared down at the nav computer. They had to get moving. "Gil, do a cross check on these coordinates."

"Looks like we're headed for the right place, Cap'n," he said, "verifying their heading."

"Our star charts show empty space. But, knowing the Empire, I bet we're gonna find us a secret research facility."

Metallo nodded.

Alex gently tapped Metallo's shoulder. "Captain?"

"Yeah?"

"I won't get in the way," Alex told her. "And I won't interfere with your mission."

"Sure, kid," Metallo replied. "Now let's get out of here. We've got a job to do." She turned her gaze from Alex to the stars in the distance. "And our little underground friend from Garos has a lot more questions to answer."

\* \* \*

Only three planets orbited the white dwarf the Imperials called Bseto. Bseto I and Indikir were uninhabited. The Lweilot Asteroid Belt stretched 90 million kilometers wide in an orbit once occupied millennia ago by their sister planet. And then there was Sarahwiee. It was an ice-covered world from pole to pole. Frozen continents rising above frozen oceans -- a truly inhospitable place.

But even from several thousand kilometers out the Imperial presence was not hard to miss.

"Star Destroyer," Alex said, pointing off their starboard bow.

"There's our *Strike*-class cruiser friend off to port," Gil indicated as the *Star Quest* was scanned by sensors. A few tense seconds passed before they were cleared to approach the planet. With the coordinates locked in, the ship plunged through the upper atmosphere of Sarahwiee.

"Would ya' look at that," Gil said.

"Gorgeous," Metallo whispered.

The last sparkles of sunlight glinted off a glacier as the *Star Quest* crossed the terminator into night. Canyons of ice rose majestically thousands of meters into the sky. Here and there, chunks of the ice wall broke off, crashing toward a frozen riverbed that shimmered in the moonlight.

Alex stared, awestruck by the magnificent vistas. Then her grip tightened on the top of Gil's co-pilot seat. She saw the mountain -- that same snow-covered mountain she'd rappelled down in her visions --

*"Alex, take my hand!" The man with sandy brown hair and blue eyes shouted above the shrieking wind. His hand reached out to hers--*

Sighing, Alex closed her eyes, not wanting to know how it would end this time. For a brief moment she sensed a calming presence. But it disappeared when she opened her eyes and caught Metallo staring at her. Alex smiled, nodding to the captain -- in their two-day journey, they'd spoken of a thousand different things. But she'd never revealed her visions of this place.

"Okay, Cap'n, I'm takin' her in," Gil reported.

Through thin wispy clouds, the Imperial garrison loomed atop the mountain. Lit only by moonlight, its shadow painted one side of the mountain in darkness, hiding snow-covered crags and one New Republic commando team.

"Okay, everybody ready for the party?" Metallo asked as the *Star Quest* landed gently inside one of two landing bays that were carved into the mountainside several hundred meters below the garrison. "Ready," Alex nodded.

"Let's go."

As they headed down the ramp, a supply skiff pulled away from the ancient Corellian freighter parked next to the *Star Quest*. The skiff moved deeper into the bay toward the cargo lift where a stormtrooper stood guard, his blaster rifle hugged to his armored chest. On the far side of the bay, with its forward section barely jutting out beyond the Corellian ship, a Kazellis light freighter was docked. Alex noticed the fleeting exchange between Metallo and Gil, the flash of recognition in Gil's face as he spied the ship -- the other team's ship, she decided.

Massive shield doors groaned shut behind them. Tugging at the collar of her jacket, Alex tried to ward off the cold blast of air that swept the cavernous room.

"Look up," Gil whispered under his breath.

Alex nodded, casually glancing in the direction he'd indicated. Overlooking the entire bay, two technicians occupied the transparisteel-enclosed control room even at this late hour.

On the other side of the Kazellis freighter, a turbolift door slid open. An Imperial officer climbed aboard a waiting repulsor sled, waving the driver on. Moving past parked supply skiffs, the sled finally stopped midway between the *Star Quest* and the Corellian freighter.

The sled driver gawked at Metallo, whose tall, lithe frame towered over her companions. His passenger, a young lieutenant, appeared impatient as he waited for Metallo and her crew to approach him. Disembarking from the sled, he gave Metallo a cursory glance. Then, with all the authority he could muster, he purposefully addressed Gil. "Captain Metallo?" he asked.

Gil smiled and pointed toward Metallo. Her face wore a sour scowl. Obviously Metallo was used to Imperial officers assuming that Gil was captain of the *Star Quest*. But Alex could sense she was more amused than angry. She seemed to enjoy the man's discomfort.

"Lieutenant," Metallo frowned down at him, slowly running her thumb along the scar on her face, "what's our schedule going to be on your lovely little iceberg?"

The officer flinched slightly, staring up into her calculating pink eyes. "I am Chief Duty Officer Cdera," he said. "There are two ships ahead of you, Captain. We have you scheduled for unloading at 0300."

"Excellent. I think you boys can handle everything without us."

"I wouldn't doubt it, Captain," the lieutenant snickered. He didn't even bother to hide his distaste for cocky freighter captains.

"Any place for my crew to relax around here?" Metallo asked, glancing around the bay as a second skiff pulled away from the Corellian frigate.

"You are restricted to this level, Captain. There is a lounge," Cdera pointed toward a hallway that ran beneath the second floor control room. "Perhaps you and your crew," he grimaced at Alex and Gil, "will find something there to occupy your time."

"I'm sure we will, Lieutenant," Metallo replied.

Cdera glared at her, then turned sharply in crisp military fashion and climbed back aboard the sled. He muttered something to the driver as the sled moved away.

Metallo shrugged. She'd put on a fine show, but the lieutenant had been unimpressed.

"I'm impressed, Captain," Alex replied quietly to Metallo's unspoken thoughts.

"Huh? How'd you--"

"Captain," Alex interrupted, "there's a computer workstation on the other side of the ship."

"Two techs unloading the Corellian in bay two, Cap'n," Gil noted. "Alex should be able to get to those computers for a few minutes."

"Keep an eye on that stormtrooper, Gil. Kid," she motioned toward Alex, "you come with me."

Within a minute, Alex had tapped into the base's computer system. Displays splashed across the screen showing the layout of the garrison. Alex waded through massive amounts of information as Metallo looked on.

"I hope your friends are aware of the security checkpoints in this facility," Alex told her.

"Don't worry about my friends. Did you find your Dr. Barzon?" Metallo asked.

"Level 18, room 14E," Alex replied, logging off the system.

"Okay," Metallo said, glancing around the bay. Her eyes came to rest on Gil, and her tough exterior melted away. It was clear that she cared for him, in a motherly sort of way.

"It's all right, Captain," Alex said softly, sensing Metallo's concern. "I'll take care of Gil."

Metallo forced down the lump in her throat. She turned back toward Alex, her feelings masked behind a stern expression. "Just remember, kid -- you've got three hours to get back to the ship."

Alex studied the older woman's face. The stern look disappeared, replaced by the trust that had grown between them during the last two days.

"And make sure you don't trip any alarms," Metallo added with a sly grin on her face.

Alex smiled. "Right."

Metallo paused, then nodded confidently. "Good luck, Alex."

"Captain Metallo?"

"Yeah?"

"The Force will be with us."

\* \* \*

Metallo sat stone-faced, peering at her opponents over the best sabacc hand she'd had all night. Lucky for her, the off-duty tech and the two Corellians were unaware of Riilebs' polygraphic ability -- they might actually accuse her of cheating!

Conversation at the next table had become more animated as the hour grew late, but Metallo concentrated on her game. She gave no indication that she recognized the female freighter pilot who entertained another off-duty tech with one fantastic story after another.

Taking a drink of her ale, Metallo eyed the old Corellian named Sapra, certain that he had a good hand. After the last cards were dealt his heart rate skyrocketed. Checking her own hand again, she smiled to herself. An 11 would give her the points she needed to win the game. Or even better, the Commander would give her a perfect 23.

Gil winked slyly at Metallo from across the room and took Alex by the hand. The final cards were dealt to the sabacc players. Bets were placed, and the dealer pushed the randomizer. The card values materialized. Metallo had gotten the Commander! She let out a shrill screech and all heads in the room turned to stare. Sapra threw his cards across the table in disgust as the scorekeeper announced the point total. The timing couldn't have been better if it had been planned that way -- which it was. No one had noticed the departure of the two young people.

\* \* \*

Across the corridor from the lounge, past the closed door that led upstairs to the control room, Alex and Gil slipped unnoticed into a storage room. Alex located the access panel in one corner of the room that she'd seen when studying the computer schematic of the garrison.

Silently they crawled through the ventilation system. Distant voices echoed over the hum of machinery in the artificial tunnel. The hum grew to a dull roar as they neared the turbolift shaft that served the garrison's upper levels.

"We're in luck," Gil whispered, pointing to the liftcar that had stopped a half meter below them. "Ready?"

Alex nodded, grabbing his hands. Gil lowered her onto the lift then carefully jumped down beside her. His gloved hands worked feverishly attaching a time-delay charge to the roof of the turbolift -- this explosion would coincide with ones that Page's team were planning in other parts of the garrison.

Alex watched as he set the timer for 48 minutes, watched as the seconds began to tick away. Taking a deep breath, she tried to relax. Forty-seven minutes. A chill crawled up her spine. "Someone's coming," she said, though several more seconds passed before Gil heard any footsteps.

The door below them whooshed open, and two passengers climbed aboard. The turbolift zipped upward, surrounded by walls of rock in the tunnel drilled through the mountain. Steel walls replaced rock as the lift entered the garrison. Gil tried to count the levels they passed. But one level blurred into the next until the turbolift finally jerked to a halt.

As the door slid open below them, Alex climbed off the lift into a horizontal shaft. "C'mon," she whispered to Gil.

Gil found himself hanging halfway out the shaft as the turbolift disappeared beneath him. "I could use a hand here," he called quietly.

Alex held out her hand, and for just an instant recalled the vision she'd had -- a hand reaching out to save her, just as she reached out to help Gil now. Could Gil be the man from her visions? Gil, with his dark hair and eyes, looked nothing like the man she'd envisioned.

But if not Gil, then who could he be? Would she find him here? With Gil safely inside the shaft, they continued their crawl. "Any idea where we are?" he asked her.

"We need to get up a couple more levels. And I think," Alex said, pointing toward a vertical maintenance crawlway, "I just found the way."

Twenty-five meters up, they entered level 18 through a supply room. Silently they moved down the corridor toward Dr. Barzon's room.

"Here it is," she told Gil. There was no security code on the door's access panel -- which was unexpected, though not surprising. The mountain and Sarahwiee's harsh climate served as a deterrent to anyone who might ever think about escaping from this place.

Alex pressed the panel and the door slid open. Cautiously they entered the darkened room.

"Who's there?" a man called from the shadows. The chill in his voice matched the temperature in the small living quarters.

"Dr. Barzon?" Alex called quietly. "It's me. Alex."

A light flicked on. "Alex?" Carl Barzon scratched the beginnings of a gray beard in disbelief. "How in the worlds did you get here?" he asked looking past her toward Gil.

"We'll explain all that later," she told him. "This is Gil, a friend of mine who's here with the New Republic."

"We don't have much time, Doctor," Gil said. "We need to get out of here."

Barzon looked away, trying to hide the haunted expression on his face. "I can't leave," he said. "They will kill my son."

Outside, the wind cried. The room seemed colder than before. Alex took Barzon's hands into hers. Memories of that fateful day on Garos stampeded her senses. "Cord is dead, Doctor. We tried to get word to you before you were arrested--"

"Before I was arrested? What do you mean?"

"I -- I'm so sorry. I was at the mining center. I sabotaged the shuttle platform," Alex told him, struggling to find a way to tell her friend what had happened. "I--" she paused again, and tears filled her eyes. "I saw them take Cord to the turbolift. I had no idea they were going to move him off-planet--"

Carl Barzon hung his head, and took Alex into his arms. "Oh, Alex!" he cried out.

"I could have stopped them, Doctor."

Barzon looked into her eyes. He wasn't blind to the anguish that she had known. "No, Alex, I don't think so." He gently wiped a tear from her cheek. "I know you well, Alex Winger. Saving Cord would have compromised everything you and I, and our friends in the resistance, have fought for."

She nodded. Freedom had never been won without sacrifice. She'd told herself that a thousand times since Cord's death. But hearing it from Cord's father, her friend, finally put her mind at peace.

Gil, who'd been listening quietly, swallowed hard. His eyes grew wide. "Winger?" he asked. He recognized that name from the mission briefing. "Did I hear you say Winger? As in Imperial Governor Tork Winger!"

Alex didn't say a word. She didn't need to. Gil's eyes shifted nervously from Alex to Barzon, then back to Alex where he fixed an accusing glare. "You should have told us, Alex!"

"Gil, everything I told you was true. Does it really matter that I left out one little detail?"

"One little detail! That is *not* a little detail, Alex!" He turned away, throwing his hands up in disgust. "Good skies! I thought you were kidding when you said you'd introduce yourself as the Imperial governor's daughter," he groaned sarcastically.

"I'm sorry, Gil," she said, sensing he was more hurt than angry. "I should have trusted you."

"Yeah, right," he nodded. "You got any more surprises? Nevermind," he interrupted before she had a chance to speak. "I don't wanna know right now. We've got to get out of here," he said softly.

"Yes," Barzon agreed, "I have no reason to stay here now. In fact, Gil, I have information that your people should be quite interested in. But I must retrieve some files from the lab."

"That's probably not a good idea, Doctor," Gil said. "It's too dangerous and we're runnin' short on time." He looked at Alex. "You heard what Cap'n Metallo said, Alex. Get the doc and return to the ship."

Alex looked from Gil to Barzon. "Can we access the files from here?" she asked the doctor.



"No, they're my private notes. Research I didn't dare enter into the Imperial database," Barzon said.

Gil shook his head. "Alex, if we run into the commando team up in the lab--"

"It's all right, Gil." Something tugged at the back of her mind. "I have to go there," she said quietly but with such intensity that it caused Gil to stare. "You take Dr. Barzon back to the *Star Quest*."

Gil regarded her silently, then finally nodded his agreement.

A few minutes later, they parted company. Gil gave her a thumbs up before disappearing after Dr. Barzon into the supply room where they'd come in earlier. Alex turned, walking swiftly down the corridor toward the turbolift. She pressed the call button and checked her chronometer. Time was running out.

\* \* \*

Even before the turbolift doors opened on level 23, Alex sensed someone was waiting for her. As she stepped off the lift, she saw a man standing in a doorway halfway down the corridor. Silhouetted by light from the lab, his face was hidden in shadows. But she could sense that he seemed to recognize her.

"I felt your presence," he said quietly, stepping into the dimly lit corridor.

Alex nodded and walked toward him, confident that this was the man she'd been destined to meet. "I've seen you in my visions of this place," she told him.

He smiled, a gentle sort of smile. "Mountain climbing?"

So he had had the same vision. "Yes," she said, as one of his comrades emerged from the lab.

"We're done here, Luke," the man said. "Lieutenant Page just signaled from the warehouse. He and Lilla are headed back to the landing bay."

"Good. Thanks, Korren," Luke said. "You and the others go ahead. Alex and I will be right behind you."

Luke? Alex's eyes grew wide. "Luke Skywalker?" she asked. Luke nodded.

Alex never had placed a name on that face from her visions, never associated the feelings she'd had with the powers of the Force. Was her destiny somehow linked with his?

"There's so little time now, Alex," he said.

Alex heard the despair in his voice. She searched his blue eyes, eyes that seemed filled with fatigue. And beyond the fatigue, she sensed a forboding in Luke's mind. Something seemed to haunt him. Something, or someone, that he had to face. Darkness beckoned, and Alex stepped back, frightened by the swirling black clouds that threatened to swallow him.

Luke held his gloved hand out to her. "Remember, Alex, the dark side of the Force breeds on our fears. Be calm. Be at peace," he said quietly. "That is the way of the Jedi."

His words were familiar to her. She'd heard them in her visions. They had always been a part of her. "I understand," she nodded, firmly grasping his hand.

"You are strong in the Force, Alex--"

Whoosh! The turbolift door opened at the far end of the corridor. Two stormtroopers exited the lift, assigned what normally was a routine check of the labs.

"... and the lieutenant said that--" The stormtrooper stopped short, catching sight of Luke and Alex. "Hey, what are you doing in here!" he shouted, bringing his blaster rifle to bear on the intruders.

Alex whipped her blaster up and fired, hitting one stormtrooper. Luke's lightsaber hummed to life as the other stormtrooper peppered the hallway with blasts from his rifle. Blaster fire arced off the greenish-white blade as Luke deflected each shot. Sparks ricocheted off every wall, illuminating the corridor in a miniature display of fireworks. The trooper retreated toward the turbolift as Alex got off a second shot. The burst from her blaster sent him 'crashing into the wall.

"I don't think they had time to call security," Luke told her as he shut down his lightsaber. "But we'd better get out of here."

"Wait! I've got to get Dr. Barzon's files," Alex said. Rushing into the lab, she passed tables laden with scientific equipment and banks of computers while Luke kept a watchful eye on the corridor.

A half dozen cabinets lined one wall. But following the doctor's instructions, Alex keyed open the one on the far right. Reaching for Barzon's files, the vision of the mountain suddenly filled her senses again. Whatever happened -- no matter which version played out here now -- she knew Carl Barzon was safe with Gil headed toward the *Star Quest*. She had accomplished her mission.

"I'm ready to go," she called to Luke.

"C'mon, this way," he said, leading her down the hallway to a turret stairwell.

Seconds later they were outside standing on the battlement, looking over a waist-high stone wall into the darkness. Far below on the mountainside, the shield doors of the two landing bays stood open -- the lights would be their beacon.

The wind howled like a wild animal in the final throes of death. Swirling snow stung their faces. They worked in silence, securing themselves to rappelling gear the commandos had left behind. Jumping backwards from the top of the wall, they began their descent down the side of the garrison.

Every few meters Alex pushed off the wall, propelling herself down. She sensed Luke's calm presence nearby as they moved through the black void. At the base of the fortress they paused to adjust their ropes.

"Everything all right?" Luke asked, shouting above the shrieking wind.

"No problem," Alex called back.

All of a sudden, a gale-force wind knocked Alex backwards. Sliding uncontrollably down the mountainside, she quickly lost sight of Luke. She slammed into a rocky crag that protruded from the snow-covered slope. It knocked her breathless, but didn't break her fall. Searing pain shot through her body. Like an ominous shadow, memories of the vision clouded her thoughts with fear.

*Calm.* She heard Luke speak to her through the Force. *You must be calm.*

In her mind's eye, Alex saw Luke. She could see her rope flailing violently in the wind. Luke called out to it, and the rope flew into his outstretched hand. It went taut, abruptly jerking her bruised body to a halt. Shaken, she struggled to gasp for breath.

*Alex?*

Alex felt Luke's touch. She tried to relax, to envelop herself in his calm. Summoning what strength she had left, she fought to hold on long enough for him to reach her. Her arms ached as she clung to the icy slope. Her legs felt numb. But finally, above the wind's deafening roar, she heard him calling her name out loud.

"Alex, take my hand!" Luke was just above her, perched on a small rocky ledge. He leaned down, stretching his hand over the snow white slope.

Alex reached up, her hand trembling. Suddenly, the snow gave away beneath her. Dangling precariously over the newly-formed chasm, she clutched the rope with both hands.

"I can't let go," she shouted to Luke.

"You can do it!" he told her.

It was almost as if he willed her the strength to reach up and touch his fingertips. She could feel the Force surrounding her as Luke reached out to take her hand into his.

He pulled her safely into his arms. "You okay?" he asked.

Taking a deep breath, Alex forced the physical pain to the back of her mind, and nodded. "Yeah."

Luke studied her face for a moment. His hand reached up to wipe the blood from a small cut on her forehead. He could tell she wasn't in any shape to continue down the mountainside to the lower bay where the ships were docked. "Let's go in through that upper landing bay," he said, pointing toward lights some 30 meters away along the mountain slope.

Alex looked in the direction that Luke indicated. Then she peered up the darkened slope, just able to trace the outline of the fortress silhouetted against Sarahwiee's dawning gray skies. She hadn't realized how far she'd fallen. "Guess I took the short cut, eh?"

Luke smiled. "Some short cut!"

"I'll try to stay with you this time," she grinned.

They trekked across the mountainside to the bay where a *Lambda*-class shuttle was being prepped for departure.

"Alex, I want you to reach out with your senses," Luke told her. This seemed as good a place as any to begin a little Jedi instruction. "How many presences can you feel?"

Alex concentrated on the bay, ignoring the cold, biting wind. She closed her eyes. "Two." She paused, cocking her head to one side as she felt a distant shadow just at the edge of her subconscious. "No, three," she said.

"Very good. Okay, get ready."

Alex nodded, wondering what Luke had in mind. Suddenly, a loud crash reverberated through the hollowed-out chamber. "Let's go!" Luke said.

As they darted across the bay, Alex spied two harried technicians scurrying toward a pile of crates that had toppled from a supply skiff near the cargo hatch of the shuttle. The skiff driver stood, hands planted on hips, eyeing the mess.

The diversion worked. No one saw Luke and Alex steal aboard the turbolift. As it descended toward the landing bay where their ships were docked, Alex glanced at Luke, noting the troubled expression in his eyes. Reaching out through the Force, she sensed the unfriendly presence they were about to face.

Luke's hand moved toward the lightsaber hooked at his waist. Alex intercepted his hand, entwining her fingers through his. "Just follow my lead," she told him. Wrapping her arms around Luke, she pulled him close and kissed him.

The turbolift door slid open. A young supply tech blocked Alex and Luke's entry into the bay, not that either of them had noticed. For a few seconds, Alex managed to forget what deep trouble she and Luke could be in. She sensed he was enjoying the impromptu kiss as much as she was.

Smiling, the technician cleared his throat. "You getting off here?" he asked, as Luke slowly pulled away from Alex.

Alex blushed, her eyes lowered. Luke looked at the technician, peered past him into the bay, and nodded. Shaking his head in disbelief, the tech watched as Luke took Alex's hand and led her from the turbolift.

Alex spied Metallo near the hatch of the *Star Quest*. Lieutenant Cdera, the officer who'd greeted them earlier, was there, too, arguing with the captain. Cdera gestured vehemently toward the dozen stormtroopers exiting the cargo lift. Something told Alex their troubles weren't over yet.

But at least her little ploy seemed to have worked. The technician sauntered past them into the lift as Alex glanced nervously toward the stormtroopers. Then suddenly, an angry wave pounded her senses. She could feel the technician's expression blacken. It hit him like a bolt of lightning -- only Imperial personnel were cleared to use the turbolifts that served the garrison. His hand reached out to block the lift door before it closed. "Hey -- wait a minute!" he shouted.

Alex turned, reaching for her blaster, and fired. The technician slumped to the floor of the turbolift and the door quietly slid shut. Hearing the commotion, Lieutenant Cdera swung around. He pulled his own blaster to ready position. "Stop those people!" he ordered over the dull roar of ship's engines, motioning the stormtroopers to intercept Luke and Alex. He never saw Metallo pull her own blaster.

Up in the control booth, one of the technicians reached to sound the alarm. Blaster fire illuminated the booth, and two more Imperials fell.

The stormtroopers opened fire. Luke's lightsaber hissed to life, deflecting a shot meant for Alex as they sprinted across the bay. Near the *Star Quest's* open hatch, Metallo was methodically picking off stormtroopers. A blast blackened a hatch strut next to Metallo's head as Luke and Alex came up beside her. Another shot bounced off

Luke's lightsaber. From controls inside the cockpit, Gil lowered the ship's concealed laser cannon. A barrage of gunfire sprayed the Imperials.

Several stormtroopers seeking cover ran toward the Kazellis freighter. Caught in the open, they were surprised by the commandos who had taken up positions around the freighter and joined in the firefight.

In a matter of seconds, the battle was over.

"Thanks for your help, Metallo," Luke said as he hooked his lightsaber back onto his belt.

"Love to stay and chat a while, Luke," Metallo told him, "but I bet we're gonna have more company."

Luke seemed to be focusing on somewhere else. He glanced up and nodded at the figure standing in the control room. "Page has jammed communications. And he's got the turbolifts off-line. It'll be a few minutes before they figure out what's happened down here."

Metallo gave Luke a two-fingered salute as she headed into her ship. Alex turned to-face Luke. She finally understood -- the visions, the unusual insights -- all the pieces had come together. Luke Skywalker had opened up a whole new world of possibilities for her. He would always be a part of her. No matter that events would take them on different paths for now -- they were a part of the Force, bound together by its energies. And perhaps, someday, she would come to know the Force completely. But, for now, they each had a job to do elsewhere.

"There's work to be done on Garos," she told Luke.

"You'll have some extra help now," he replied.

Alex glanced toward the cockpit of the *Star Quest* and nodded. Her eyes came back to Luke's, and she held her hand out to him. A shy smile crossed her face. He took her hand into his and squeezed it gently. "We will meet again, Alex," he said.

He watched her walk up the ramp into the freighter. Alex took one last look back and waved good-bye.

\* \* \*

The *Star Quest* rose into the sky just as the sun peaked its head through clouds in the east. Carl Barzon came up beside Alex in the cockpit, placing his arm across her shoulders. "I never thought I'd leave this place," he said. "Thank you, Captain Metallo."

"Alex is the one you should thank, Doctor," Metallo told him. "For the daughter of an Imperial governor, she's some kinda Rebel." Barzon smiled at Alex and gently kissed her on the cheek before heading back into the passenger compartment.

"Gil told you?" Alex asked.

"Yep."

"I--"

"Don't say anything, kid," Metallo said.

Alex nodded as Gil entered the cockpit, winked slyly at her, and strapped himself into the co-pilot's seat.

A brilliant explosion flared behind them as the *Star Quest* moved out of Sarahwiee's atmosphere and toward deep space. "Gil, plot us the quickest course outta here."

"Course computed and laid in, Cap'n."

"We're away," Metallo called, pulling back on the hyperdrive. Alex gazed out the viewport as the stars blurred into starlines. A feeling of calm pervaded her senses. Across the endless boundaries of space, she felt Luke's mind touch hers one last time.